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Saving Celluloid

The team at 'Ulu'ulu aims
to preserve every frame of
the Islands' visual history

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PHOTOS BY **DANA EDMUNDS**

Saving Celluloid

Heather Giugni is in a race against time. But as we speed toward the future home of 'Ulu'ulu, she breathes an audible sigh of relief. The building looming on the horizon before us—the soon-to-be-completed campus library of the University of Hawai'i at West O'ahu—will play a vital role in securing the huge goal Giugni has been driving toward for years: preserving the entire visual film history of Hawai'i.

A documentary filmmaker (recently turned state legislator) with a passion for telling Native Hawaiian stories, Giugni's been part of a tight-knit circle of local filmmakers since the 1970s, when shooting on videotape and film was the norm. The filmmakers were rich in ideas but poor in cash—which meant, says Giugni, that they couldn't afford to create climate-controlled storage units to protect the hours and hours



and hours of footage they'd shot from the ravages of Hawai'i's humid environment. And so, she says, "We'd just keep all the raw tapes and drag them around. Oh my God, you have no idea what that was like. It was like two thousand tapes!" Over the years, tapes such as hers sat on the bottom shelves of homes, in museums and in news stations across the state—precious materials at risk of decaying past the point of no return. In the meantime technology evolved as recording switched from analog to digital. The best way to safeguard the materials, it became clear, would be to convert them to digital—but that was another expensive proposition. And so the question remained for Giugni and her colleagues: "What are we going to do with our films and how can we preserve them?"

The answer came soon after her father Henry Ku'ualoha Giugni, the former Sergeant-at-Arms to the United States

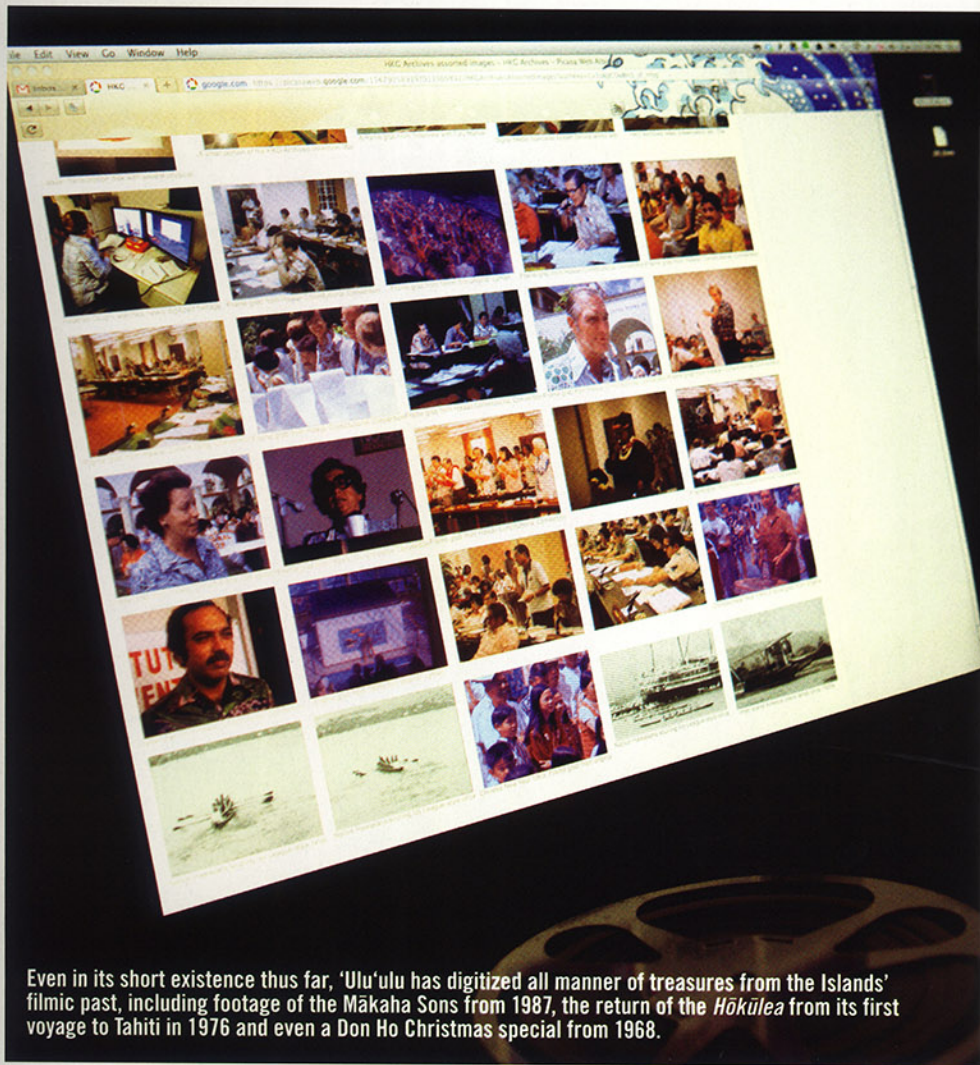


Heather Giugni inspects a piece of Hawai'i history: footage of the debates at the state's 1978 Constitutional Convention. The reel of film is just one of hundreds that the team at 'Ulu'ulu aims to give new life by digitizing.

Senate, passed away. In 2005 Giugni was approached by Sen. Daniel Inouye, who was seeking a way to memorialize Henry Giugni, who had long been his political confidant and friend. The filmmaker suggested creating a much-needed digital archive in her father's name. The state-of-the-art archive Giugni envisioned would serve as a visual encyclopedia of Hawai'i's history, a comprehensive and authoritative collection that would, in the words of its mission statement, "perpetuate and share the rich moving image heritage of Hawai'i through the preservation of film and video." Eventually the project came to be known,

in honor of Heather's father, as 'Ulu'ulu: The Henry Ku'ualoha Giugni Moving Image Archive of Hawai'i. 'Ulu'ulu is Hawaiian for "collection" or "assembly."

Stepping into the disarray of the library construction site, it's not easy to see that grand vision right away. That's where Giugni's directorial skill comes in. Her hands sweep across empty air, framing every room and detail of the library's eleven thousand square feet, pointing out everything from where a hidden projector will pull down to where a patron will be able to get a cup of coffee.



Even in its short existence thus far, 'Ulu'ulu has digitized all manner of treasures from the Islands' filmic past, including footage of the Mākaha Sons from 1987, the return of the *Hōkūle'a* from its first voyage to Tahiti in 1976 and even a Don Ho Christmas special from 1968.

The library will include a communal area for viewings, screenings and discussion; a sanitation room where all incoming reels will be quarantined for cleaning and cataloging; a digitizing room where films will be edited, transferred to digital and uploaded to the archive's website; and a climate-controlled preservation room that will store some twelve thousand videotapes and three hundred film reels. "The future of this is huge," says Giugni as we stand in the center of the library. "It's a living, breathing movie museum for past as well as future films."

It's a living, breathing movie museum that almost didn't happen. As we complete our tour of the library site, Giugni tells me that a physical library wasn't initially in the plan for 'Ulu'ulu; in the Internet age her priority was strictly to digitize everything and put it all online for public viewing. But with the involvement of Chris Lee, the founder of UH's Academy for Creative Media, 'Ulu'ulu was designated a special project under the UH system and given a home at the newest UH campus. Lee him-

self had long envisioned a digital archive for Hawai'i similar to the Densho Digital Archive or Steven Spielberg's USC Shoah Foundation Institute. Friends since the 1970s, Giugni and Lee make a good team in this quest—she, the pragmatist, champions the need for preservation while he, the academic and film producer, sees the creative potential for a historical archive.

"We live in an age where no one believes anything unless they can find it on the web and see it for themselves," notes Lee. "These are the stories of Hawai'i ... of course, they'll be a great resource for documentaries, but I've always believed that these pictures and words will inspire narrative filmmakers to create original stories based in our collective memory and community."

Those pictures and words are currently boxed away in a corner office at the studios of television station KGMB. For the past two years, this office just to the edge of downtown Honolulu has been the temporary lab of 'Ulu'ulu's head archi-



ivist Janel Quirante, its cataloger Jacob Rosen and its media specialist Robbie Omura. Here, more than ten thousand tapes sit waiting to be transported to their permanent home in West O'ahu—and it is this trio of archivists who are most familiar with their content.

On the day I visit I take a seat before the lab's desktop with Omura and Rosen, and they play me a few examples of tapes that have made the journey from analog to digital. We start with some of the newer transfers: a 1987 performance by the Mākaha Sons; footage of a Hawaiian man shouting in pain as he's evicted from his Sand Island home in 1980; footage from the 1978 Hawai'i State Constitutional Convention; footage from the 1976 return of the *Hōkūle'a* from its first voyage to Tahiti; a 1968 Christmas special featuring Don Ho decked out in silky Hugh Hefnerish pajamas; JFK and first lady Jackie Kennedy being welcomed at Honolulu Airport in 1963. Further back, the dates of some of the archives' oldest treasures can only be estimated: irrigation workers digging a ditch in Maui's sugar cane fields (likely circa the 1940s); a woman in a dazzling flapper dress debarking from an Inter-Island Airways plane. Each of these pieces opens up another window onto our ever-changing Islands.

Rosen, who was clad in faded blue coveralls the day I met him, actually looks the part of a gold miner, though he pans with his eyes instead of his hands, scavenging through thousands of hours of raw tape, cataloging and coding as he goes. To completely execute the migration from

Saving Celluloid



Giugni with the 'Ulu'ulu crew (left to right): head archivist Janel Quirante, media specialist Robbie Omura and cataloger Jacob Rosen. The trio has now digitized hundreds of hours of film and will continue its work after 'Ulu'ulu moves into a new home on the UH West O'ahu campus.

analog to digital, Rosen hands these materials to Omura who converts them on a SAMMASolo, a machine that translates analog content to digital files in real time. The only machine of its kind in the state, it saves 'Ulu'ulu's staff from having to send any materials to a Mainland lab. It also allows the conversion to happen with a minimal amount of physical stress on the actual tapes and film reels. To date the trio has digitized 350 hours of footage; their goal post-move is to digitize an additional five hours every week.

Quirante oversees the entire operation while also managing copyright issues and building partnerships with private film collections. A strong foundation for that work was created in 2010 when 'Ulu'ulu undertook a pilot project and approached sixteen differing organizations such as the Hula Preservation Society, the television station KGMB, UH's Sinclair Library and prominent local filmmakers like Victoria Keith and Gene Kois.

"What we did was say, 'Give us your most broken films that you don't have the ability to transfer, and we'll pay for that,'" says Giugni of the project. It was a success and showed the model could work; as an example of the treasures saved, Giugni cites

1960 footage of a volcanic eruption in Puna that was uncovered by Hilo's Lyman Museum; the film on which the eruption had originally been shot was old and wearing out. "I'm telling you the truth: They would've never digitized that film; that stuff would've disintegrated," says Giugni. "It was just on the edge." Instead there was a much happier ending: After the footage was digitized, it "turned into a whole new exhibit for them," says Giugni. "Those films gave them new life on different levels, you know?"

'Ulu'ulu's UH archives are set to open August 4. Online, visitors will be able to search 'Ulu'ulu's site and look for everything from the broad ("surfing") to the specific ("Patsy Mink"); each file in the archives will have a thirty-second preview online and can be viewed in its entirety at the physical library. There the work to grow the website and the archives will continue. "This is the project," Omura says, "that will outlive everyone." **HH**

Visit 'Ulu'ulu online at uluulu.hawaii.edu. If you have analog videotapes or films of Hawai'i that you wish to donate, contact the archives at uluulu@hawaii.edu.